

Nature, Norms and Democracy

Lucien Scubla

I am quite prepared to admit that modern western thought is shot through with contradictions. For example, it is not coherent to think both that the idea of human nature is an illusion and that eugenics is an out-and-out evil; or to claim to be a democrat and exclude *a priori* the topic of eugenics from political debate. However, I personally very much doubt that the notions of nature and democracy are themselves in crisis. In my view they simply give rise to semantic confusion and false problems that certain basic twentieth-century discoveries – in the field of physics, anthropology and political science – ought to be able to clear up, if they were better known. We shall just touch on a few thinkers whose work may give us some pointers to a clearer, calmer view of things. First a philosopher, Raymond Ruyer (1902–1987), and an economist, Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950), two of whose key ideas this paper will combine: a neo-Aristotelian conception of nature, implying the existence of regulating principles and norms, to which humans and their societies, like everything else, are subject;¹ a procedural conception of democracy that says it is not an end in itself but, under certain conditions, an appropriate means of making political decisions and settling disputes.² And in addition some anthropologists, who helped either to put human beings back into a neo-Aristotelian world, or to define more accurately the essence of the political: Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose structuralism gave back its full importance to the notion of formal cause and even to the idea of final cause,³ and André Leroi-Gourhan, who confirmed that ‘art imitates nature’ by demonstrating that technical skill is a natural extension of life, whose processes and results it mimics;⁴ Arthur Maurice Hocart, who demonstrated the ritual origin of all institutions, particularly political ones.⁵

Although they were to a great extent independent of one another, all these ideas fit together if we accept that the human world is subject to norms but that these norms cannot be known (or not with ease). Indeed the problem of norms is both an ontological and a cognitive one, and there are few possible solutions to it. The first hypothesis is that there are norms and they are accessible either to an enlightened minority: Plato’s philosopher-king or Marx’s proletariat, who lead the rest of the people towards the promised land, by imposing their dictatorship if need be; or to everyone: the people conceived of by ‘classic doctrine of democracy’ (Schumpeter), whose infallible general will – or its assumed representatives – can ‘compel to be free’, as Rousseau says, individual wills that are at any time erring or recalcitrant. The second hypothesis is that there are norms, but no one can be sure they know what they are, or several of them are contradictory (because there is no single common Good, as in Plato, Marx or Rousseau): democratic process is not a magic recipe for making the right choice, but the most reasonable way to settle disputes between those who know or think they know, or put forward different options. The third hypothesis is that there are no norms, but only differing aspirations or wills:

democratic process is, yet again, the best way to ritualize conflicts and violence between those who uphold diverging ideas of the common good.

In the following lines I will set out some reasons for thinking that we are in the second situation.

Nature and norms: Aristotle's revenge

An error that has been widespread for three centuries is the one that identifies the natural world with the extremely partial image of it that classical physics gives us. And so human beings seem either to be intruders in it whom we try vainly to 'naturalize' by reductionist methods, or else to be demigods with extraordinary technical powers that raise hopes or fears that are to a large extent illusory.

Despite these unfortunate intellectual consequences our contemporaries find it extremely hard to rid themselves of this error, which is based on a mistaken interpretation of the revolution triggered by Galileo and Descartes. We make the mistake of thinking that this revolution entirely superseded Aristotle's physics, where it merely destroyed his mechanics and the cosmology flowing from it. In fact, far from being outdated, the general principles of Aristotelian physics can be reconciled with modern science and even provide it with a framework.

We should remember that in Aristotle's work nature means spontaneity and purpose. So a natural movement is a spontaneous purposeful process, like the one that impels an acorn to become an oak tree, a stone to seek out the centre of the earth, an individual to become a citizen. To say that 'human beings are *by nature* political animals' is equivalent to saying they spontaneously group together in increasingly large communities until they reach a perfect form of society – the city (*polis*) – that is, one that allows people to develop their potential to the full, and in particular the more specific types, such as the disinterested pursuit of science. Thus a natural being is one that has an internal principle of movement and rest: for movement is the transition from potential to action, and it ceases when the purpose is achieved.

Aristotle distinguishes natural from forced movement, but this opposition does not imply any kind of dualism: it simply flows from the interaction of natural beings and their movements. The acorn pushing up the earth in the course of its natural growth, the bird building a nest, the gardener pruning or training a tree are all forcing a natural being to occupy positions or assume shapes which they would not tend to spontaneously. Neither does the distinction between natural and artificial objects, which results from the previous distinction, imply any sort of dualism. The processes of art mimic those of nature, and it is part of the nature of some beings to produce artificial objects.

And so human beings are not cut off from the rest of the world, because it is a complex interweaving of differentiated beings which all act spontaneously for purposes peculiar to the classes they belong to, and in which each one is working at carrying out fully its own specific activity, unless it is prevented by external causes.

This description (which has been too briefly summarized) is not at all out of date. Life is more fundamental than matter and Aristotle accurately constructed a general system of physics that draws on biology for its principles. His error was that he treated the movement of a stone as a similar process to the development of a living being, in other

words he understood certain forced movements as natural ones and so constructed an erroneous system of mechanics from a biology that was fundamentally true, because he had not recognized the principle of inertia.

But classical physics since Descartes has made the opposite mistake: constructing an erroneous theory of biology (one with animal-machines, which today's biology has still not emerged from) on the basis of solid accurate mechanics. Indeed it is impossible to understand the emergence of living and of thinking beings in the totally inert world of Galileo's and Descartes's physics, where there is no natural movement in Aristotle's sense, but only forced movements, since each body simply receives and passively transmits the movement it has received from other bodies, starting with the initial impulse from the divine 'flick'.

The law of inertia implies a rejection of purpose (since to explain a movement is not to say where it is going but merely where it is coming from). Purpose then is either an illusion (Spinoza) or an incomprehensible fluke. Human beings become strangers lost in a silent universe, as Pascal put it in a famous saying that does not express a personal vision and is not an artificial teaching device either, designed to terrify free thinkers, but simply sets out the new image of the world.

It was necessary to wait until the last century in order to see that image questioned by physicists themselves; they were forced to recognize that particles, which had been considered inert, had properties traditionally attributed to living beings,⁶ whereas biologists, and even some psychologists or anthropologists,⁷ are still clinging to a materialism inspired by nineteenth-century physics. The result is that, in spite of this skirmishing in the rearguard, it has now become possible to reconcile science post Galileo with Aristotelian philosophy, as Leibniz wished.

Indeed the paradoxical properties of the atom and the impossibility of providing a mechanical model of it⁸ give us a glimpse of a continuity between atomic forms, living forms and thinking forms that means we can turn our backs on Cartesian duality and put human beings back into nature in a non-reductive manner. Not by setting up the inertia principle as a general law of nature as Spinoza did, but on the contrary by generalizing the principle of purpose on the basis of what Raymond Ruyer calls the 'axiological *cogito*':⁹ for, since purposeful activity is undeniable in humans, and they did not make themselves *ex nihilo*, it must already have been present in nature before them.

This thesis does not mean rejecting classical physics but affirming its derivative or secondary status. Indeed, as Ruyer¹⁰ demonstrated, and Pierre Auger¹¹ too, it is necessary to distinguish two types of natural phenomena: individual and collective phenomena,¹² or more precisely two kinds of being and law, which correspond respectively to Leibniz's monads and aggregates and their primitive and derivative laws. Primary beings – such as an atom, an animal or a human – which have a particular form that they tend to develop and maintain through standard internal activity (and here we again come across Aristotle's natural movement), and secondary beings – such as a gas, a flock of migrating birds or a crowd of drivers – which are a consequence of the simple accumulation of the first and of their local interactions spreading out wider and wider (and this again is forced movement). And as a correlate of these two types of being, there are two quite distinct types of natural law: primary (Ruyer) or integral laws (Auger), which are proper laws or more precisely formal causes – such as Pauli's principle of exclusion that determines the structure and stability of atoms¹³ – and secondary or differential laws, which are merely

statistical regularities, that is, mass effects, and not causes, of actions they express without determining them – such as Mariotte's law, which expresses globally the local interactions of a very large number of gas molecules.

Secondary laws are the laws of classical physics and its extensions. They place on primary beings limits that are more or less wide but never determining, because they are only overall statistical effects. This is the case, for instance, with demographic laws. Primary laws are those of microphysics, biology and anthropology. They act as norms that for primary beings are the conditions *sine qua non* for their existence and survival. Pauli's principle lays down the totality of actual and possible atomic forms and *a priori* allows us to reconstruct Mendeleev's table.

However these norms are more or less restrictive when you go up the hierarchy of beings: they are unavoidable for the situation of atoms and molecules but 'influence without compelling' the actions of living and thinking beings. Every iron atom is real iron but a living being may be an imperfect representative of its species or even a monster, and it is quite hard to know what it means 'to be a real human' or to decide whether a society is more or less civilized.¹⁴

Nevertheless there are norms for human societies as there are for atoms, and perhaps they are equally strict, so much so that both Ruyer and Lévi-Strauss suggest it might be possible to draw up a Mendeleev table for cultures,¹⁵ and their hypothesis could be corroborated by more recent research.¹⁶ But these norms are very difficult to pinpoint. If societies develop in a 'structured axiological space' (Ruyer), if they make 'choices' from an 'ideal repertoire' (Lévi-Strauss), the fact is that we do not know either that space or that repertoire, and the choices in question are entirely or almost beyond human consciousness and will. Humans are indeed political animals by nature, but we do not know what sort of norms direct their development and what kind of structures it may result in.

Hence the fallacious idea that there is neither human nature nor transcendent norm but simply completely open undetermined history, the product of a freedom that nothing can restrict either in fact or by right. This is an illusion shared by existentialists and constructivists as well as all those who would rehabilitate the old distinction between the *phusis* and the *nomos* as an equally specious opposition between the given and the construct, which classical physics had appeared to affirm. Even Lévi-Strauss, whose scientific work however is in the Aristotelian style, sometimes allows himself to fall into it: the nature/culture pairing is a variant of the sophist distinction that he brought back into currency. 'Everything that is universal in humans', he writes, 'comes from nature and is characterized by spontaneity; everything that is ruled by a norm belongs to culture and has the attributes of the relative and particular.'¹⁷ This famous text, which seems to draw a strict demarcation line between nature and culture, contains a 'plethora of sophisms'. Setting up as equivalents the criteria of spontaneity and universality, it precludes *a priori* the existence of natural differences and universal norms. But this is patently false. There are natural differences associated with a discipline that used to be called, quite accurately, physical anthropology. And there are also many transcultural principles, the inventory of which is far from completed.¹⁸

The 'dual criterion of universality and norm' is a teacher's device to make the ban on incest, a universal rule, seem like an exceptional rule. Its main drawback is that it puts the norm, and therefore culture, outside nature, whereas humans are by nature cultural beings: political animals, said Aristotle, to whom we must return yet again.

Democratic process and ritual

Nowadays we tend to make 'democratic' synonymous with 'good' or 'just'; to talk of 'democratic values, ideals or standards', etc., as if democracy was an end in itself, whereas it is process for making political decisions that can be good or bad, according to circumstances. History demonstrates that the democratic process is not always the most positive one, and this is not surprising. Collective passions can be disastrous and even if we reduce human beings to pure minds, they are not omniscient. However, with regard to the two kinds of law we have identified – primary laws, which society has to obey in order to have a stable structure, and secondary laws, which affect its relationships with other societies and those between its own components – political activity would require exceptional farsightedness to be always wise and effective. This is why human beings who think they can appeal to a religious definition of Good, or imagine they know the 'laws of history', refuse to take account of the opinions of the man or woman in the street and 'arithmetical chance'. As Schumpeter explains, we should not take offence at this, since they are right to refuse to see democracy as sacred. Neither can we criticize them for making cynical use of it, if necessary: being democrats when it serves their interests or their notions of good. For once again democracy is not in itself a value system, but an institution with very relative qualities.

If, despite everything, it is best to prefer democracy to another system, this is because it is impossible to arbitrate, using the intellect's resources alone, between the rival claims of individuals or groups who are, rightly or wrongly, convinced they are blessed with divine revelation or superior prescience. It is because, in a situation of limited rationality, with human beings' inability to identify objective goals or to agree all together on common subjective principles, democracy ought to be, and indeed turns out in the long term to be, the least bad of all possible systems.

But we must not overestimate it, or expect miracles from it that never come to pass and may lead to all sorts of disappointments. Nothing is more dangerous for freedom than people who are let down by democracy and ready to support some kind of despotism out of pique. So it is imperative, for the very survival of the system, to have a true image of it. Schumpeter must be congratulated for taking on this teaching role, and pointing out the unacceptable defects in the classical doctrine that Rousseau himself had already partly noticed, but without drawing all the conclusions.¹⁹ We have to abandon once for all the concept of the general will of the people. Democracy does not mean giving power to the people but to the majority of their representatives, and the will of the majority, says Schumpeter prosaically, is only the will of the majority.

In short democracy is not a government of the people by the people, but a process that allows the people to choose those who govern them: which means pluralism, public debates, organized competition to win the votes of the electorate, and regular recourse to elections. On this topic we can only refer the reader to *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

The democratic process has the advantage – and it is probably a force for stability – of being justifiable by means of arguments of a widely differing nature, which partly cancel each other out, but which the logic of the 'kettle defence'²⁰ makes compatible.

As Aristotle says, a decision made by several mediocre individuals who reach agreement is usually better than one made by a superior person who decides alone. So it is reasonable to have confidence in the result of a democratic vote, at least if it is preceded

by an honest well-argued debate. The question remains as to whether, in public affairs, we are dealing with true debates or mere political sparring.

Pascal would reply that, regardless of all that, the democratic process does not lead to decisions on what is good and just. But it is a factor in ensuring civil peace, for the majority principle, which gives preference to the opinion of the largest group, has the advantage of setting justice and power on the same side but without identifying them by name. In addition, whether political debate is motivated by concern for the public good or desire to beat the opponent, it means conflicts are ritualized and compromise is required. Even if it does not solve the problems it is explicitly addressing, it contributes to society's stability by organizing the struggle for power and containing it within tolerable limits.

We might respond to Pascal by objecting that, even in a democratic regime, it is still a minority that governs and not the majority. But this is to ignore the fact that the people exercise their prerogatives not only when they choose but also when they reject a politician. Those who govern are less the representatives of the people or the majority of the people than willing scapegoats, selected by the democratic ritual and expelled in time of crisis, but not slaughtered like the old-style king (Louis XVI) or the modern dictator (Ceausescu), who are genuine sacrificial victims.

In short, only one thing is certain: democracy is a process leading to the resolution of many disputes in a relatively peaceful manner. But it is not a remedy for all ills, since its stability relies on a wide consensus as to its nature and limits that it is unable to provide itself. If people stop believing in the effectiveness of the democratic ritual, *ipso facto* it loses its advantages. There is no democratic solution to the crisis of democracy, nor *a fortiori* to a general crisis of society. There can only be spontaneous solutions that reason will probably be able to explain with hindsight, but not foresee or direct.

Lucien Scubla

CREA-Ecole Polytechnique

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. R. Ruyer (1946), *Eléments de psycho-biologie* (Paris, PUF); (1948), *Le Monde des valeurs* (Paris, Aubier); (1952), *Néo-finalisme* (Paris, PUF).
2. J. Schumpeter (1974), *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, original edition 1942.
3. C. Lévi-Strauss (1971), "Le structuralisme est résolument téléologique". *Mythologiques*****, *L'Homme nu* (Paris, Plon), p. 615.
4. A. Leroi-Gourhan (1964 & 1965), *Le Geste et la parole* (Paris, Albin Michel).
5. A.M. Hocart (1927), *Kingship* (London, Oxford University Press); (1933), *Progress of Man: a short survey of his evolution, his customs and his works* (Methuen, London); (1970), *Kings and Councillors* (Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press), original edition 1936.
6. N. Bohr (1964), *Physique atomique et connaissance humaine* (Paris, Gonthier); P. Auger (1952), *L'Homme microscopique, essai de monadologie* (Paris, Flammarion); A. Kastler (1976), *Cette étrange matière* (Paris, Stock).
7. See L. Scubla, *Sciences cognitives, matérialisme et anthropologie*, in D. Andler, *Introduction aux sciences cognitives* (Paris, Gallimard), pp. 421–446.
8. B. Ponomarev (1974), *Au pays des quanta* (Moscow, Mir), pp. 98–105.
9. *Néo-finalisme*, p. 1–15.

10. For a synthetic view see L. Scubla (1995), Raymond Ruyer et la classification des sciences, in L. Vax & J.-J. Wunenberger, *Raymond Ruyer, de la science à la théologie* (Paris, Editions Kimé), pp. 75–90.
11. *L'Homme microscopique* (see note 6).
12. 'Classical physics deals only with collective phenomena. To the opposite microphysics leads naturally into biology. From the individual phenomena of the atom it is in fact possible to go in two directions. A statistical accumulation of them leads into the laws of ordinary physics. But if these individual phenomena are complicated by 'systematic' interactions, while still retaining their individuality within the molecule, then the macromolecule, then the virus, we get to the organism, which, regardless of its size, remains "microscopic" in that sense' (Ruyer (1958), *La Genèse des formes vivantes* (Paris, Flammarion), p. 54).
13. Ponomarev, op. cit., pp. 111–118.
14. Ruyer, *Le Monde des valeurs*, pp. 132–133.
15. Ruyer (1952), *Néo-finalisme*, p. 248; Lévi-Strauss (1955), *Tristes tropiques* (Paris, Plon), p. 183.
16. L. Scubla (2000), Françoise Héritier et l'avenir du structuralisme, in J.-J. Jamard, E. Terray & M. Xanthakou, *En substances, Textes pour Françoise Héritier* (Paris, Fayard), pp. 37–45.
17. Lévi-Strauss (1967), *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, translated from the French by J.H. Bell, J.R. von Sturmer & R. Needham (Boston, Beacon Press), p. 8.
18. L. Scubla, Diversité des cultures et invariants transculturels, *Revue du MAUSS* no. 1 (1988), pp. 96–121, no. 2 (1988), pp. 55–107, and no. 11 (1991), pp. 132–136.
19. L. Scubla (1992), Est-il possible de mettre la loi au-dessus de l'homme? Sur la philosophie politique de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in J.-J. Dupuy, *Introduction aux sciences sociales. Logique des phénomènes collectifs* (Paris, Ellipses), pp. 105–143.
20. 'The whole plea [. . .] recalls vividly the defence offered by a man who was accused by his neighbour of having returned a kettle in a damaged condition. In the first place, he had returned the kettle undamaged; in the second place it already had holes in it when he borrowed it; and in the third place, he had never borrowed it at all', Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, ch. 2.